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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the development of a counseling intervention for use with youth in managing their anger. The anger-management materials described combine elements of a cognitive-behavioral approach with a process orientation to help at-risk youth maintain a career. It is noted that students are taught a strategy for dealing with anger and that, through a series of activities, students move from a controlled situation with scaffolding provided by the teacher to an internalization of the strategy. The strategy presented is called CALMER, with each letter of the name representing a step for students in managing their anger: (1) C stands for Check that there is a problem; (2) A means Assess the problem; (3) L is for Listing the possible solutions; (4) M means Make a choice; (5) E represents Evaluate; and (6) R stands for Repeat-if-necessary. Student activities that involve the strategy include brainstorming, discussion groups, making posters, and role-playing. Three evaluations of the counseling intervention have been completed and are reported in this paper--two in individual counseling situations and one in a small-group setting. The evaluations note that, in each case, the students showed evidence of learning the strategy and also of the ability to employ the anger-control procedures in the classroom setting. Anecdotal evidence from tape transcripts are used to illustrate specific instances of the counseling intervention's utility. (Author/NB)

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Anger Management for At-Risk Youth

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ABSTRACT

Anger management is an important skill for youth to learn in order to succeed in their careers. In this paper, we describe a counseling intervention that has proven successful with adolescents. The anger-management materials were designed to help at-risk youth maintain a career. In the program, the students are taught a strategy for dealing with anger. Through a series of activities, students move from a controlled situation with scaffolding provided by the teacher to an internalization of the strategy.

The strategy is called CALMER. Each letter represents a step for students in managing their anger. C--Check there is a problem. A--Assess what the problem is. L--List possible options. M--Make a move (i.e., put the best option into action). E--Evaluate the results of your action. R--Repeat, if necessary. Student activities involving the strategy include brainstorming, discussion groups, making posters, and role-playing.

Three evaluations of the counseling intervention have been completed. In each case, the students showed evidence of learning the strategy and the ability to employ the anger-control procedures in the classroom setting. Anecdotal evidence from tape transcripts are used to illustrate specific instances of the counseling intervention's utility.

This paper focuses on the development of a counseling intervention for use with youth in managing their anger. We look at the elements of the intervention as well as anecdotal evidence of its success, based on three implementations--two in individual counseling situations and one in a small-group setting.

Anger management is an important skill for youth to learn if they want to succeed in their careers. Mueller, Wilgosh, and Dennis (1989) used a survey to question employers about job survival skills. They found that employers rated the chances of employment survival for entry-level workers as greater when those individuals had a minimum of anti-social behaviors. Wilms (1984) discovered that the majority of employers surveyed (63%) regarded work habits and attitudes as the most critical aspects for employment success. Recently, Porter (personal communication) has conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with employers. Her initial analysis suggests that employers value starting employees who are able to control their anger on the job.

Deffenbacher, McNamara, Stark, and Sabadell (1990) compared two methods of counseling for general anger reduction: cognitive-behavioral and process-oriented. The researchers found that both these methods were effective with introductory psychology students who were experiencing anger control problems.

Our intervention combines elements of a cognitive-behavioral approach with a process-orientation. Because of the use of these two strands, we felt that our

intervention would prove effective with young people who were unable to control their anger.

Description of Intervention

The counseling intervention described in this paper is part of a larger set of intervention materials developed by the Pathways project. These materials are designed to help at-risk youth examine career options, obtain employment, and maintain a career. Although the anger-management materials were originally intended to consider problems that arise on the job, we have found that many young people need a strategy for controlling their anger related to their present concerns, whether on the job, at school, or at home.

The strategy used for anger management is CALMER. Each letter of this mnemonic represents a step in controlling anger. C stands for Check that there is a problem. Often, young people do not think through whether a problem really exists before reacting. A means Assess the problem. The client tries to think of the problem in concrete terms. L is for List the possible solutions. We encourage the youth in our program to consider as many solutions as they can imagine. M means Make a choice. Once the options have been laid out, it is important for the person to take some action. E represents Evaluate. What was the result of the option you chose? Finally, R, Repeat if necessary. If the results from the first option selected are not satisfactory, the client should go through the steps again.

There are six activities designed for this anger management intervention, all stressing the CALMER strategy. In the first activity, the counselor introduces the CALMER strategy. The clients make a poster of the strategy to reinforce the concept. Then, the group or individual generates a list of situations that could cause difficulties in controlling anger. The second activity builds on the first activity. The clients select one of the situations from the list generated the previous session and use the CALMER strategy to work through the problem. Once clients have worked through a couple problems successfully, the youth consider a different problem with a partner. The pairs share their conclusions with the whole group. The third activity focuses on small group work. Using the anger situations from the first session or later situations that have since suggested themselves, the group is divided into smaller groups of approximately four people. These small groups use the CALMER strategy to resolve conflicts chosen for examination.

The fourth through sixth activities involve the clients role-playing anger-provoking situations in three different stages. In the first stage (activity four), participants remain seated and orally rehearse the CALMER strategy while role-playing. The second stage (activity five) adds action to the role-play while maintaining the verbal prompts. The final stage (activity six) continues the role-play actions but eliminates the verbal prompts.

Method

The present paper presents anecdotal evidence from three implementations of our anger management intervention. In the first instance, the counselor (the first author) worked with a 19-year-old male. This male, we will call him Kevin, was in a secondary school in a rural area. He had been classified as having a behavioral disability according to provincial guidelines. Kevin's resource room teacher recommended him for our project. The intervention with Kevin continued over five sessions of approximately one hour each.

The second intervention paired a counselor (again the first author) with a 17-year-old male, whom we will name Eric. Eric attended a high school in a medium-sized city. This young man had originally been classified as learning disabled but, at the time of the intervention, when Eric was in grade 11, his behavioral problems had become acute. Eric's resource room teacher referred him for this program. Eric's intervention lasted seven sessions of approximately 45 minutes each.

The third intervention involved six grade 9/10 students with anger control problems from a rural high school. These students had been recommended by their classroom teachers as needing to manage their anger. Two counselors (the first author and a female counselor) worked with this group over eight 45-minute sessions. There were four males and two females in the group.

Although the intervention materials were evolving during these implementations, the content presented was similar

throughout, particularly the use of the CALMER strategy. All sessions were audiotaped and the transcripts analysed for research purposes.

Results

Rather than present a complete description of each of the interventions, these results will examine one specific incident from each of the cases. These incidents have been chosen for illustrative purposes. The results are written in the first person by the first author.

Case One: Kevin

Kevin is a large, muscular young man. Having heard of Kevin's violent nature, I approached my first session with him with much trepidation. After an interval of small talk, Kevin and I started to generate a list of situations that would cause him (or someone like him) to become angry. Jointly, we arrived at a list of ten situations. I asked Kevin to select one of these situations to examine in more depth. He suggested that we look at "see an injustice committed to other person or property." I thought that topic was too vague and asked Kevin to be more specific. His response was "The one that I hate the most. People how is it somotizing [sic-sodomizing] or molesting anyways children."

I was rather surprised by Kevin's choice but decided we would go through the steps of the CALMER strategy, looking at his selected problem. As our session continued, I realized that Kevin was not talking about an isolated problem of limited

personal concern but instead about himself. I don't remember exactly when I understood that Kevin was talking about himself but it may have been during the following exchange.

> K: The cop comes down with them. They knock on the door. They say, okay, you know, everything. And then the cop can sort of, you know, take the kid, just to the side and try to talk to him. And plus the police and the Children's Aid together have a better way with children than uh just a big man in blue with some gun at his side.
>
> J: Okay. So you think the Children's Aid Society has a better way with the kids.
>
> K: Yeah. Cuz you think about it, if you were a kid, right, and um you were just sexually molested and then you see another guy that's just as big as your dad but wearing a badge and everything. It may hit you. Yeah. But then if you see another guy coming in just dressed in a tuxedo or whatever, maybe, it'll give him a better understanding.

Later in the session, perhaps five minutes after I guessed Kevin's personal abuse as a child, Kevin decided to reveal the connection himself. He says, "Okay. I know this because it happened to me." This revelation must have been extremely difficult for Kevin to make as can be seen by his later description of the hospital collecting physical evidence of sexual abuse.

> K: Yeah. And then once they get the physical evidence, then the kid's so, usually when a kid's in a situation like that, he's so scared, he'll just tell you. He doesn't want any more attack. He doesn't want anybody touching him. You know, you, you know, when a father has a child, you know how easy the child is, doesn't care if he walks around with no clothes on or with clothes on.
>
> J: Right.
>
> K: But yet if if they're trying to do these tests and the kid's too scared to you know take off his uh you know that there's a problem going on there.

For the rest of the session, Kevin revealed more details of his sexual abuse. Some of the details were certainly painful to reveal. "It's always in the back of their mind, you know. Okay, you know, but he seems like a nice guy and everything but, uh, I don't know something about him." "With all these stupid commercials on it but nobody ever actually came into my life and dragged me out of the house and gave me a place to sleep, and eat, and all that. Nobody really cares."

After the session, I talked with the resource room teacher, who had worked with Kevin for 3-1/2 years. I told her how amazed I was that Kevin would confide in me such personal details at a first session. She responded that, to her knowledge, Kevin had never confided about his sexual abuse to anyone in the school before.

Case Two: Eric

I was well-acquainted with Eric before we began working on anger management. We had worked through seven previous sessions on making friends as well as pilot testing materials for students to expand career options. Also, he had come to my office for a visit and we had toured the faculty of education where I work and eaten lunch there.

During our sessions, Eric and I talked about many situations and role-played problems in his life. In particular, we focussed on incidents that Eric had recently mishandled or upcoming situations that were causing him anxiety. Eric, at this time, was especially concerned about his relationship with his new

girlfriend, whom we will call Linda. Eric had had a series of relationships end badly and was very interested in making the present relationship work. In the third session, for example, Eric talked about his previous girlfriend and why he stopped seeing her.

J: Was this a big argument?

E: Oh yeah. Yelling and. Right in front of everybody.

J: Yelling and screaming at Bohmie's in front of everyone?

E: Right after my lip synch too.

J: Right after you had felt good about something.

E: Yeah. So I got pissed off and I told her to. Get the. That blah out of my face and leave me alone.

J: Right in Bohmie's this was going on? And other people could hear you?

E: Yup. All all people were just turning their heads. And I I maybe they could hear me over the music. It was pretty funny.

In the fifth session, Eric and I tackled the problem of his relationship with Linda directly. I planned to play Linda in the first role-play while Eric played himself and then switch roles. I introduced the role-play as follows.

J: So you're gonna use the check, assess, list, make, evaluate, repeat strategy. And I'm gonna be Linda upset with you and I'm upset because you have decided that you're gonna go back, that you were, that you saw Wendy [fictitious name] there, Wendy that you used to go with.

We tried to make the situation as realistic as possible so that should Eric ever encounter a similar case, he would know what to do. The realism can be seen in the following transcript.

J: Who's that babe you were dancin' with?

E: That's my ex-girlfriend.

J: Your ex-girlfriend. You sure didn't look like any ex-girlfriend there. The way you were dancing. Why did you have to pick that song to dance with her for? Why that song?

E: Cuz yup, that was our song.

J: I know and it's a slow song and you got your hands all over her. You were mauling her.

However, when it came time for Eric to play the role of Linda, he was unwilling to do so. His explanation reveals just how important it is for him to preserve Linda's companionship.

E: I didn't want to play Linda. Cuz I like Linda a lot and I don't want to think of the fights we'll get in.

J: Means you're gonna get into fights?

E: No, we're not gonna get into fights.

J: You get into fights with almost everybody.

E: I'm gonna try. I'm gonna try and make it good.

J: So you're not gonna dance with Wendy?

E: No, I'm not gonna dance with anybody else but her.

Case Three: Small Group

In the fifth session with the small group intervention, the students considered a problem that bothered them at school. We decided to look at school-related issues as these youths needed to manage their anger in their present circumstances. The female counselor worked with the two girls in preparing possible options for dealing with this problem while I worked with the three boys who were present. Within our groups, we also ranked the three best options and the poorest choice before meeting again to discuss our results.

The problem discussed was "teachers being nosy about your own business." The girls' best and poorest options follow.

1) keep it private and don't let your emotions show in school

2) ignore him

3) write or phone the teacher

Poorest) [tie] tell him off punch him

In explaining their best option, the girls stated that teachers ask about your personal business because you are coming into class demonstrating what you are thinking. The best solution, therefore, is to keep matters to oneself.

The boys' solutions to the problem were quite different.

1) ignore the teacher/go on like you didn't hear it

2) walk away

3) tell him/her off in a nasty manner (swearing)

Poorest) tell the teacher privately

The boys' reactions are notably different from those of the girls. The boys are more likely to react hastily and will do almost anything not to reveal the information. However, through seeing both perspectives, the boys may come to realize the value of other actions.

Discussion

This anger management intervention was originally designed to help at-risk youth cope with job demands. The rationale behind the CALMER strategy was that young people often fail to maintain careers because they are unable to control their temper. However, as we used the CALMER strategy with actual clients, we found that the original intention was best served by responding to the youths' more immediate concerns about anger control.

In Kevin's case, his anger-control problems likely stemmed from incidents in his early childhood when he was sexually abused by his father. By discussing his early experiences, Kevin go their implications and dealt with present problems. Through the use of the CALMER strategy, Kevin was able to confront his fears and develop strategies for dealing with his concerns. Kevin has since overcome many of his anger management problems and is presently in the first year of a trades program at a community college.

One of Eric's pressing concerns was his inability to maintain a relationship with a woman. With a counselor's help, Eric anticipated problems in his relationship with Linda and rehearsed his reactions. In addition, he articulated the importance of success. Now, one year after the end of the intervention, Eric and Linda are still good friends. This calm in his personal life allows Eric to deal with other stressful situations better, including problems that arise on the job.

We found with the grade 9/10 students that the prospect of a job was too remote for them. The school situation, however, has many important parallels to the job situation. For instance, in the illustrated incident, the teacher asking about personal business is similar to a supervisor asking an employee for private information.

In conclusion, the CALMER strategy has proven most successful in use with young people in both an individual and a small group counseling situation. Although many of the discussions in the interventions do not involve careers per se, preparation for employment is evident in either stabilization of the personal life or thinking about present situations that have parallels in job situations. The youth who have participated in these interventions report generalized problems with anger control. Our hope is that if they learn a strategy and use it daily, they will adopt this approach in employment situations. In the future, we will be expanding the use of our anger management program to both larger groups and older clients where we hope to demonstrate the strategy's general effectiveness.

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